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ABSTRACT

When the literature and the research results on sentence combining are analyzed, they seem to provide an expanded meaning of sentence combining and reasons for its affects on the writing of some students. Gains in syntactic maturity alone do not explain why sentence combining affects positively the writing of some students, nor does the fact that students learn to control syntax within rhetorical contexts. But the latter, together with knowledge of the classroom emphasis on close reading, does lead to a new way of looking at sentence combining--not simply as a program to expand single sentences devoid of context, but as a program of syntactic options for revising sentences in the context of paragraphs and larger units. It may be that sentence combining practice improves writing quality because in giving students control over syntax--as evidenced in part by greater T-unit length variation--it makes them aware of how to rewrite. More than a simple gain in syntactic skill, this awareness is a quantum leap in perception for most students. It affects their writing positively because it gives them control over syntax and the knowledge that writing, rather than being merely a process of setting down on paper a preconceived product, is a process of vision and revision, a way of seeing. (RL)

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WHAT IS SENTENCE COMBINING AND WHY DOES IT WORK?*

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Sentence combining works. Studies from elementary school through the first year of college and beyond indicate that sentence-combining practice can help students increase their syntactic maturity levels and improve their writing. As John Mellon recently stated, "I don't know of any component in our arsenal of literacy-teaching methods that is better supported empirically than sentence combining" (35). Still, in reviewing the volume in which Mellon's statement appeared, Stephen Witte indicated that at least two questions about sentence combining remain unanaswered: "What does the term sentence combining mean? and why does sentence-combining. . .instruction seem to affect positively the writing of some students" (437)? Since we know it works, maybe it is time, as Witte suggests, to sit back and interpret the what and why of sentence combining. To that end, I would like to take up Witte's questions one at a time and show how the answer to the first begins to answer the second.

When Hunt first suggested "a kind of sentence-building program. . .to widen the student's span of grammatical attention and concern" (157) and for a long time thereafter, there was no question about what sentence combining meant. The phrase was a self-explaining compound, like sewing machine or picture tube: sentence combining was a sentence-building program based on the embedding and reduction principles of transformational grammar, a program which got students to consolidate little sentences into big sentences. The big sentences were single sentences. The big sentences were isolated sentences. Since it was linguistic drill, researchers logically assumed that sentence combining worked to increase T-unit length and thereby to accelerate syntactic maturity because it tapped into a well of syntactic knowledge that students, as native speakers,

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possess. When it was discovered that sentence combining also helped students to become better writers, that was considered an added benefit and a natural outgrowth of their gain in syntactic maturity. The accepted explanation was that one produced the other. After all, as Mellon claimed, "large syntactic-fluency increases must inevitably, sooner or later, boost quality scores" (1979, 37).

When sentence combining research and pedagogy, following Bill Strong's lead, ventured into new territory--combining little sentences into big sentences that made paragraphs and whole essays--the meaning of the term sentence combining became more complex because the way it was used in class changed. Sentence combining became a means of teaching rhetorical principles as well as syntactic elaboration. Therefore the phrase was no longer a self-explaining compound, though it was still often understood that way. James Kinneavy, for instance, sums up the difference between the control and experimental curriculums in the Miami research study in this way: "The control group read and analyzed essays, studied rhetorical principles, and wrote some themes, while the experimental group combined sentences and combined sentences and combined sentences and also wrote some themes" (68). A more accurate description of the sentence-combining program would be that the students combined sentences into paragraphs and essays, read their efforts out loud, listened to the rhythms of their prose, discussed the rhetorical effects of their syntactic choices, learned how many different ways there are to say the same things, and also wrote some themes.

The sentence-combining curriculum was designed to teach the effective use of syntactic structures, that is, to give the students a large repertoire of structures from which to construct stylistically effective sentences. To this end, they practiced model exercises designed to produce such structures as appositives and absolutes, participial phrases and infinitive phrases, relative clauses and adverbial clauses. In the whole-discourse exercises they learned to use such structures for balanced syntax, for coherence, for emphasis, and for tone.

In order to see how students are taught to use syntactic options for rhetorical effects, let's look for a moment at what happens in a typical sentence-combining class that uses whole-discourse exercises. I've excerpted the following transcript of such a class from Beth Neman's Teaching Students to Write (265-66). The class is discussing two student versions of an essay on W. C. Fields. These are the relevant kernels:

63. The fraud had the last laugh on the public.
64. And the fraud had the last laugh on the public's sentiments.
65. The laugh was last.
66. The fraud was old.

67. The man died on Christmas Day 1946.
68. The man claimed to hate children.
69. The man claimed to hate Christmas.

70. He turned a celebration into a wake.
71. He would have enjoyed knowing it.

Teacher: Let's compare Tanya's last paragraph to Sarah's.

Judy: Tanya has not combined as many sentences together: "The fraud had the last laugh on the public's sentiment. He claimed to hate children and Christmas yet died on Christmas Day in 1946. He would have enjoyed knowing he had turned a celebration into a wake."

Tanya: As you are reading it again, it makes it seem like it was his idea to turn a celebration into a wake. But that's not what I meant to do.

Teacher: Not only that, the fact that hating Christmas would normally keep you from dying on Christmas. I'm not exactly sure about that. Let's take a look over here at Sarah's. "The fraud had the last laugh on the public's sentiments, when as an old man he died on Christmas Day 1946. The man who claimed to hate children and Christmas would have enjoyed knowing he had turned a celebration into a wake." What is the difference between what Tanya has done and what Sarah has done, Bill?

Bill: Sarah's got fewer sentences.

Teacher: Is that all there is to it? Bill, read them over yourself out loud. (Bill reads Tanya's version)

Teacher: Now the other one. (Bill reads Sarah's)

Bob: Tanya's is kind of like he planned the whole thing out and Sarah's is more like he would have had a laugh if he knew.

Judy: Sarah's just seems to roll better than Tanya's because it's a bit choppy.

Teacher: Tanya's is a bit choppy. But I'd like to get beyond just that it does flow or it does roll. I'd like to get to why, if we could. Robin?

Robin: There's a point in the paragraph in Sarah's that makes the relationship between him hating Christmas and children and dying on Christmas.

As you can see, the students in this class didn't combine sentences just to create longer clauses, T-units, and sentences. Nor does the writing of sentence-combining students in these classes evidence just longer syntax. The sentence-combining students in the Miami study, for instance, produced syntax with more variety of T-unit lengths than that of the controls. In other words, while increasing their syntactic maturity scores, sentence-combining students also developed more sensitivity than traditional students to syntactic-stylistic options as these were reflected in wider variations of T-unit lengths.

If the use of whole-discourse problems and other curriculum changes confused the issue of what the term sentence-combining means, the results of recent experiments confused the issue of why sentence combining works. The research results indicated that the assumed cause-effect relationship between syntactic elaboration and writing quality probably did not exist. Some experiments suggested negative results from syntactic maturity increases. Maimon and Nodine, for instance, indicated that after a certain point their students "lost control of their sentences" (240). Others suggested that even when syntax and quality both improved, no relationship could be shown between the two. Faigley reported that on a multiple regression analysis, the three measures of syntactic maturity--clause length, T-unit length, and clause-per-T-unit ratio--together predicted less than 3% of the holistic rating (203). The results of a regression analysis in the Miami study substantiates Faigley's: less than 4% of the posttest holistic rating was predicted by the syntactic measures (1126).

In brief, gains in syntactic maturity do not explain why sentence combining affects positively the writing of some students. Nor does the fact that students

learn to control syntax within rhetorical contexts. But the latter, together with knowledge of the classroom emphasis on close reading, does lead us to a new way of looking at sentence combining, not simply as a program to expand single sentences devoid of context, but a program to revise sentences in the context of paragraphs and larger units.

In relationship to sentence combining as a means of teaching revision, Beverly Swan notes an interesting and little-studied fact about the progress of learning within a sentence-combining program. Early in the course, her college-level students readily applied their newly learned sentence-combining techniques to whole-discourse sentence-combining problems. That is, they quickly improved their syntactic maturity scores on sets of sentences given them as input. But only late in the course did they produce longer syntax in their own writing. Swan concludes that "the application of [sentence-combining techniques], then, occurs in rewriting before it occurs in draft writing" (223).

It may be that sentence combining practice improves writing quality because, in giving students control over syntax--as evidenced in part by greater T-unit length variation--it makes them aware of how to rewrite. This awareness is more than a simple gain in syntactic skill. It is a quantum leap in perception for most students. Remember that research into the writing process indicates that students typically perceive of composing in a linear model: from thinking, to writing, to revising. As Sommers and Schleifer conclude from their work on revision: "Students cannot see, literally they cannot 're-view,' other possibilities and directions in their writing. Assuming as their teachers tell them that writing communicates, they attend to the elements of communication, defined as words, grammar, and mechanics. . .without imagining the adventure of developing and modifying their thoughts or experiences in the process of composing" (4). Unlike Philip Roth's reclusive writer, E. I. Lonoff, students don't "turn sentences around" when they revise. They understand revising simply as a process of exchanging words and cleaning up spelling and punctuation.

This lack of understanding of the writing process severely limits student writing. The process of writing should be a process of discovery, a sequence of steps in which the writer, by first setting down a draft and then by turning sentences around, by decomposing and recomposing, in essence by re-vising, sees new relationships, even finds the core of what he wants to say. In other words, there should be a give and take between writer and text. As Richard Lanham explains the process, "The writer controls words. Then they, as his first draft, control him. He then as revisor, controls them" (39). The writer who perceives of the first draft as an essentially finished product which needs only rewording never gets into the second necessary stage, where words control him, where life, imagination, and voice are breathed into writing. The student simply translates one set of words into another, sometimes with disastrous results, as when a student of Sommers and Schleifer turns "'children love junk food'" into "'children never eschew surrogate commestibles.'" I cannot imagine the students in that sentence-combining class--after realizing that Tanya and Sarah produced strikingly different effects by writing different stylistic versions of the same exercise--revising their own prose by exchanging words.

What, then, does the term sentence combining mean? And why does sentence-combining instruction seem to affect the writing of some students? If the answers are not explicitly stated, they are implicit in the literature and in the research results. Sentence combining is not simply a linguistic means to produce longer syntactic structures. It is a rhetorically motivated program that teaches students to use syntactic options. It affects their writing positively because it gives them control over syntax and the knowledge that writing is not merely a process of setting down on paper a preconceived product, but that writing is a process of vision and revision. Sentence combining is a way of seeing.

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